

ARA Event Observer Report

Observer Name:

Claire Hernandez

Observer State of Residence:

New York

Event Name:

Boston Riichi Open 2026

Event Location:

The Foundry, 101 Rogers St, Cambridge, MA 02142

Event Date:

August 15-16, 2026

Number of Participants:

108

Event Schedule Summary: *(Days played, number of rounds, finalist rounds, time per round, etc.)*

The tournament consisted of two days and eight hanchan, four on each day. There was no cut to a top table. Games were 75 minutes + 0 with a swiss bucket scramble.

Names of Officials/Judges:

TO: Buckle Venable

Head Judge: Calvin S.

Judges: Zi Song, Yicheng, Kate

Subs: Frankie, Junji, Joe, Jay

Other helpers: Deanna, Mark, Jerry, Max, Cole, Matt, Glenn, Lestor, Joe, Alexandra

Communication to Players: *(How were announcements, standings, pairings etc. communicated to players during the event?)*

Information on the standings and pairings was made available via a spreadsheet that was linked in the BRO discord. There was some confusion when the link to the pairings and standings needed to be changed on the morning of the event and there was one working and one non-working google sheets link, especially as the QR code to the nonfunctional link was printed onto the badges of the players.

Announcements were done at the start of the first tournament day and were also slightly rocky. Because pairings hadn't been generated for the first round at the start of announcements at day 1, players hadn't yet gone to their seats and many were milling around or standing outside and missed the announcements. Then, because of an urgent user operation issue with the pairing software, the tournament organizer had to step away from announcements during the rules talk with the head

judge. During this time the head judge struggled to answer rules questions and had the mic taken over by other judges to correct answers he was misstating, such as whether ankan ron for kokushi was allowed (head judge said yes, floor judge took the mic to say no, another floor judge took the mic to say they are allowed sometimes, floor judge 1 took the mic back to say yes but not here, etc..) These confusing lines of communication may have been prevented if the TO was present and in charge of the operation.

Prizes:

1st-8th: Trophies, medals, and chocolates

Yakuman armbands

Consolation trophy to a deserving player of the TO's choice

Catering:

There were waters and snacks available on site in one of the tournament rooms. There was a matcha stand in the building of the tournament where drinks were available for purchase.

Tournament Atmosphere:

The atmosphere of the tournament was warm and positive, with the local players being friendly and welcoming along with the local staff. Comments were submitted to the observer in praise of the good venue and accommodating staff. However, as previously noted some confusion was present due to difficulty accessing standings and some frustration was present due to tournament issues, which will be discussed below.

Complaints and Compliments

Very Major Issues

- The lack of adequate experienced judging staff had a serious impact on accuracy of rulings in the tournament. The head judge had never judged a mahjong tournament before and was unfamiliar with the WRC rulebook, and Boston staff relied on judges from New York as the experienced judges.
- An improper use of swiss pairing buckets by subdividing the groups too small led to duplicate and triplicate pairings that are generally unacceptable at open tournaments.
- The tournament was intended to have a 30k start, and was set up including printed paperwork to that effect, but due to a lack of required 5k sticks had a 25k start instead. This leads naturally to more busting which slows down games as judges must be summoned with bust sticks, having a direct impact on games as well as confusion in score reporting.
- The first and second hanchans were run using +50 instead of +30 for the uma for first place, and that was not corrected until mid-round 2, after pairings were generated based on it for round 2.

1. Timing & Scheduling

- When game time was up and players had received extra time, there was no timer keeping track of that, either from the tournament projector or the staff. This led to an incident where a table finished their hand and didn't know if they could start another or not because they didn't know how much time had elapsed. So they just assumed they were done and stopped there.
 - Several complaints that the lunch break was too short on Sunday (only 40 minutes), not allowing players to go further than the limited local restaurants for lunch.
 - One complaint about the uneven start times on the two days leading to confusion, and a recommendation to just start them both at the same time even if that's later in the day.
 - One complaint that the hanchan timer was too short, leading to their last dealership being skipped 4 times.
 - There was one or two rounds where the 15 min before hanchan end announcement was made ~1-2 mins late because no one was paying attention to the timer at the time.
 - Most hanchans on the first and second day started approximately 5–10 minutes late. Hanchan 7 was also delayed slightly due to announcements and a small pairing fix. These delays particularly affected players whose games ran long, further reducing their available lunch time.
 - Time running over on Day 1. It was clear during check in that things were going to run late because announcements started late and tend to run longer than people expect. It also felt like the tournament could have started earlier as it does on Day 2. We were all standing around waiting for announcements to eventually start. Hopefully next year the games start earlier.
 - The timer in the second room was very low. Playing in that room you had to crane around to try to check how much time is left vs room 1 where it is clear. A second projector or just a way to put the timer higher would be great.
-

2. Judging

- As stated: "In hanchan 7, we picked winds and then rolled for dealer. When player 4 got to the table as we did this, I rolled and kami became east. Player 4 then says ok what's next roll. Everyone else at the table has only done one roll, player 4 does not want to be north, insists its supposed to be 2. We ask a judge, judge does not know and says do whatever. We ask head judge he says whatever, I guess do one roll. Player 4 escalates and TO who is walking by gets asked. TO says club way is draw for winds, take what you get. We then get confused, I do not want second roll cause if kami rolls I'm likeliest to be north, kami does not want initial because he is north, and player 4 (toimen) does not want one roll cause she is north. We are debating what to do because not unanimous, then TO says build walls get ready, marker is in front of me and I say "I guess TO call stands". We finish hanchan before time but very unsatisfying with no official draw (also player 4 played very slow for game)"
- There was an empty call and player didn't know whether it was a warning or dead hand, called judge, judge Kate came over and after saying it was a dead hand, she asked the player

if he knew what a dead hand was (he was an experienced player but wasn't super hip to tourneys), she started explaining it but did it in a way that was confusing and made it sound like he HAD to tsumogiri even though it was not a riichi hand. The player had to step in to reexplain and correct the explanation. In the player's words, "She didn't seem malicious or unknowing, but just explained it poorly that looked like it would lead to a misconception so I had to step in to correct it."

- In one ruling, a certain number of tiles were knocked over, and the judge decided the game state was unrecoverable and issued a chombo. The four players complied with the ruling during the game, but escalated to the TO after the game believing it was unfair. The TO personally interviewed the four players associated with the ruling without involving the judge and then chose to overrule the chombo. The TO gave the rationale "so the players don't have a negative experience at our tournament," which is not an acceptable reason for a ruling to be overturned.
- One player commented that judges were clearly unprepared for judging. Head judge went to their table and was unsure the ruling on an empty call, north pon without it being callable.
- A player false ron'd and didn't show the hand. Judge Kate gave him a dead hand when it should be a chombo — it's not lower penalties. Anyways later on they gave him a -30 after the game, but basically the incident is just that judges didn't know the call and it wasn't anything especially complicated.
- A player asked the judges/TOs generally whether direct draw or traditional draw was being used. Judge Kate responded, "Do you have a problem?" in a manner that the player felt was unnecessarily confrontational and disrespectful. I replied, "If I do, I will reach out to the ARA observer." I believe reasonable questions regarding tournament procedures should be addressed professionally and respectfully.
- At HC3, a player was found to have revealed four tiles. Judge Kate initially ruled the situation a dead hand and instructed the players to shuffle, despite players pointing out that if the ruling was a dead hand/warning, reshuffling was unnecessary. The table accepted the ruling and continued play from East 1. Approximately 30 minutes later, Kate returned and retroactively issued a chombo. Under WRC rules, however, this situation is only a chombo when seven or more tiles remain in the live wall. The initial ruling, unnecessary reshuffle, and subsequent retroactive change to a chombo made the handling of the situation appear inconsistent and disorganized.
- In hanchan 1, one player's game ended the game with 17 riichi sticks (1 extra). TO originally said -0.3 per person to split the stick, the player challenged because she checked her sticks in the beginning and didn't feel she should be penalized, TO changed ruling to be left as is. The all-last sheet was originally wrong but players fixed the scores on the sheet before playing so not really sure where the stick spawned from.

3. Scoresheets & Paperwork

- On day 1, it was not clear to players that the tournament wanted to fill in the scoresheet with the final converted points (with uma) because the system seems to be automated. In general, there might have been some disagreements on what info players should be writing on the scoresheet and it might have been helpful to call a group meeting to clarify what they wanted players to do with the scoresheets (and all-last sheets). Also, some of the other newer staff members were having trouble filling the paper scoresheets correctly so having some briefing beforehand to make sure everyone knows how to do it correctly might have been helpful.
 - The publicly displayed pairings sheet should not also be the active sheet that staff are working on. A separate staff working sheet and player-facing sheet would help prevent confusion or unintended changes.
 - The spreadsheet was having loading issues for one player and at least 3 other people they spoke with. This might have been a data connection problem. The player eventually spoke with someone who recommended getting on the Foundry wifi which seemed to help. By that point the player had also downloaded the Google Sheets app so maybe it was a combination of changes. Not sure if there's an easy solution to this.
 - Various typos on forms lead to some confusion. At first the tables listed for the rooms were a bit off. Was fixed after I think Game 1. The final score sheets are also for a 30k start vs the tournament's 25k.
-

4. Game Setup & Equipment

- 25k start, while not really a big deal, has a few ramifications to play: throwing off instinctive scoring considering any other competitive format is 30k start; in an aka ari tournament busting is already more frequent, even more so at 25k start, causing lost time waiting for busting sticks, while playing under a timer. Could have easily been fixed by asking before the tournament in a set volunteering form "hey does anyone not have enough sticks, we can get extra sticks beforehand." Complaints came from many players regarding this.
 - Not an easy fix but the number of YMI sets was notable. I say this only because I had multiple people mention it but I also know that it can be difficult to get enough of the usual 28mm(I believe?) AMOS type of sets. I imagine after this successful event they'll have time to acquire more sets next year.
-

5. Rules and Pairings

- Game 7 had 3 of the same players as game 6. Only the player that got 4th in the previous game was switched out. When the player asked staff, they said there was no way to fix this as they had run the pairing software for multiple iterations and it kept reproducing this table. Improperly used swiss software was suspected, and discussion after between myself, the observer, and known community swiss expert MrBlarney revealed that optimally there

should be around 32 players per bucket, when based on what was made known to BRO attendees, the staff were using 8 buckets for only just over 100 participants. This pairing of course has a butterfly effect on subsequent pairings because it never should have happened in the first place.

- The website said "wrc with these mods" and didn't say pao off, 25k start stuff like that, but it was included in the next section but I just think its not great, like there were more mods than listed.
 - In the final hanchan, I was in one of the top buckets playing for ARABUX, and our table had a substitute player. While I understand that the substitutes are placed based on need, but it felt unusual playing for conditions with one player essentially being there to fill. He had played 3 Hanchans and had scored pretty well, so he was placed in our bucket.
-

6. Venue, Hospitality & Social Experience

- Several complaints that the lunch break was too short on Sunday (see also Timing & Scheduling above), not allowing players to go further than the limited local restaurants for lunch.
 - The lack of any freeplay/feeling of being rushed out on Sunday post tournament was a little disappointing, there was barely any time for people to do more socializing post tourney, especially considering the earlier close times of the venue at 10pm friday/saturday. I get its the venue's rules, and it was a fantastic venue to play in, but tournaments (at least for me) are largely a social outing, and i felt like i didnt have enough time to chat and shoot the shit with people as i would have liked.
 - Lack of free play was a big disappointment, I understand venue limitations but it sucked feeling rushed both Saturday and sunday night to get out.
 - Regarding the water provided, it would have been nice to know upfront that people would need bottles. I appreciate the provided water bottle but one concern my friend had is they would want to wash it first but we're in a hotel so then it's getting dish liquid etc. Many people also already have bottles and would likely have brought them if they had known. Then Mass Riichi could have had their branded bottles as backup for people who forgot or just as a merch offering.
-

7. Observer

- A player noted it felt like a conflict of interest for the observer to step in and help with fixing the score software during stuff, considering the observer is supposed to be a third party it felt a little odd seeing my hand in keeping stuff afloat.
-

8. Player Etiquette

- Although player etiquette was generally very good, certain players still slammed tiles when declaring tsumo or ron, which could be disruptive to the table. Player recommends having all players watch the etiquette video during registration.
 - As stated: "Game 7 also had an instance where it was suggested due to the, in my opinion, ridiculously slow pace of play, that we do an all last sheet at 8:30 remaining. Staff and general practice across events I have attended in the past tend to apply this at 5 minutes remaining, so in order to try to get a full game (this was in S3) we proceeded without. The two players were so slow we timed out the hand a few tiles before ryuukyoku, with me not knowing my conditions to improve my placement. This does not reflect on the staff any more than this table should have just not happened in the first place with correct pairing, but it does leave me wondering if we all need to be more heavy handed when someone spends 5 seconds in the tank for every discard like they are using a full online play timer for each and every turn.'
-

Compliments

- Where the fix was easy the staff handled it as quickly as possible. The final score sheet was fixed, the correct table numbers were written on to the signs, the 50 uma error was caught and announced pretty quickly etc.
- The goodie bag is nice. One player was with a friend who is a first time tournament go-er and they were impressed. The branding is nice and it's useful items. Also loved the badge ribbons!
- Great location! Lots of room and it feels comfortable and fun. Lots of food and snack options in easy walking distance.
- The Chi Party themeing and rule set is cute.
- All the staff interacted with were friendly.
- The venue was amazing: easy to get to, with a comfortable setup, good air conditioning, adequate sound, and an overall comfortable environment for play.
- One player would like to commend Head Judge Calvin for being understanding, respectful, and professional throughout the situation. Overall, the TO and judging team handled the subsequent chombo dispute well, particularly by reviewing the circumstances and ultimately reversing the incorrect point penalty. I appreciated their willingness to reconsider the ruling and correct the outcome.
- Player etiquette was generally very good throughout the tournament.

Observer Personal Summary:

This was Boston's first tournament and I was really moved by all of the staff and local players' enthusiasm and friendly attitudes, really caring for players' experiences in a variety of ways both socially and providing free merch and accommodations for players in wheelchairs and making handmade chocolates for winners. The energy was really positive in the room and that made the tournament really pleasant to be at. Great venue with good public transit options and plenty of bathrooms is a must for a tournament.

However, it was clear that most of the actual mahjong side of tournament operations had not been stress-tested or practiced prior to tournament day, leading to really serious issues throughout the event. The lack of local judges leading to serious mis-applications of penalties, the need to swap to a 25k start due to lack of 5k sticks, the issues with the pairing software, and the duplicate pairings in the event were all issues that could have been solved with either a smaller tournament, a simpler pairing format, or if a tournament of this scale and complexity was really wanted, definitely additional practice and dry runs prior to the tournament, and a stronger recruitment for and practice with the rulebook for judging staff.

I would recommend to ARA that next year Boston should be scaled down to a player count that can be supported by local judging staff.